

# The Macomb Daily

## **\$1.5 million project seeks to bring back wildlife to Metro Beach**

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By Jameson Cook - Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Metro Beach Metropark will be site of an ambitious, \$1.5 million project to revive up to 500 acres of marshland that has nearly dried up due to development and invasive plant growth.

A team of determined environmental experts gathered at the Harrison Township park Friday to discuss the plan to return the “wet” to “wetlands” in the area in the Lake St. Clair Coastal Wetland Restoration Project.

Officials believe the project will improve habitats for plants and animals, waterfowl and fish, by adding water and reducing the overbearing, non-native plant, phragmites.

“We’re hoping through hydrological manipulation and invasive species control to get this back to something you would have saw in the late 1800s or early 1900s,” said Dianne Martin of ASTI Environmental, who is leading the project.

“I don’t see where this marsh project will have any negative impact; I only see positive impact,” said Paul Muelle, chief of natural resources for the Huron-Clinton Metropark Authority, which owns and operates Metro Beach, at Metropolitan Parkway and Jefferson Avenue.

The project’s federal funds are coming from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, secured by the Macomb County Department of Planning and Economic Development. Initiative funding comes from roughly \$300 million approved by Congress, proposed by the Obama Administration for this fiscal year.

ASTI Environmental, located in Brighton and Grand Rapids, is the project leader. Partners include Applied Sciences Inc. and Hamilton Anderson Associated, both Detroit-based.

The project is in the early planning stages as wader-wearing designers completed their first tour of the area Wednesday. They plan to create a blueprint and obtain government permits over the spring and summer, and start construction in September, Martin said. Once the work is bid out, construction should be completed by December, with monitoring to continue for two years.

Much of the current 770-acre park once served as a delta to the Clinton River, said hydrologist Karen Ridgway of Applied Sciences, and is one of the last marshes of its kind on the United States side of the Great Lakes.

“A portion of this marshland is Great Lakes coastal marsh; that is a very rare wetland type in the Great Lakes these days. It’s an endangered landscape,” said environmentalist Mark Richardson, a former environmental assistant prosecutor in the Macomb County Prosecutor’s Office.

But the land has dried up considerably over the past 60 years due to the construction of housing, roads and the park along the river and on the lakeshore, as well as the aggressive phragmites and cattails that were carried here from overseas in ship ballasts, officials said.

Officials believe that creating waterways and attracting wildlife will attract recreationalists. People will want to kayak or canoe through the area like a miniature Everglades, or bird watch along trails or boardwalks traversing the marsh.

"Why not restore the environment where we live and not hundreds of miles from where we live?" Richardson said. "We hope once these marshlands are restored and expanded they will become a recreational asset for the township and the surrounding communities. We can envision things like boardwalks, kayaking and canoeing. Businesses that might locate here to take advantage of the recreation that will be developed."

Gerry Santoro, of the county planning office, cited a study that shows restoring wetlands is a good investment.

"From an economic development perspective, every dollar in restoration in the Great Lakes is worth \$3 to \$4 in return, in development, tourism and tax revenue," Santoro said.

"It's all about quality of life," said state Rep. Anthony Forlini, R-Harrison Township. "This is important for our people (and) water quality."

The project coincides with a \$500,000 grant received by the HCMA, Harrison Township, Ducks Unlimited and the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments to remove phragmites from St. John's Marsh and the Metro Beach marsh. The project, in its second of three years, involves the burning, spraying and mowing of phragmites.

"The timing of the grants was really great," Muelle said. "It's great for the marshland, it's great for the park and it's great for the residents."

Regarding the design, Martin, director of resource assessment and management at ASI, said officials hope they don't have to seed the area. They hope "seed beds" of species overtaken by phragmites will grow anew, she said.

Project activity could include dredging or creating drains to improve water flow, Martin said. Berms could be built to facilitate ponding.

The project area includes roughly 80 acres of privately owned upland parcels in the northwest corner that officials hope to purchase.

Examples of wildlife officials hope to return to proliferation include the marsh wren, least bittern (tiny heron), eastern fox snake and black tern, officials said. "Lots of diversity (is the goal), there's so many other different species," Martin remarked.

But officials also noted that whatever the project achieves, its designers remain at the mercy of Mother Nature, most notably rising or falling water levels.

"I'm optimistic will be a healthier eco-system when it's done," said Allen Chartier, a certified bird bander who will help monitor the project. "You're never sure what can happen."